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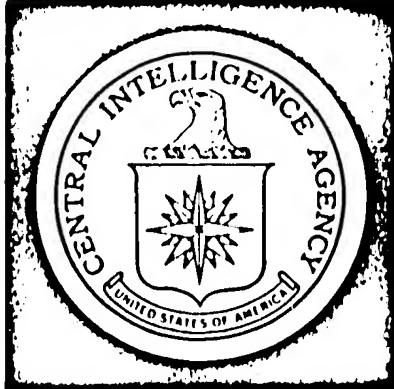
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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

The Ho Chi Minh Trail

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
March 1971

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Ho Chi Minh Trail

Introduction

The Ho Chi Minh Trail, the popular name for the Communists' logistic system in the Laotian Panhandle, is very much a misnomer. It is really a labyrinth of roads, trails, waterways, small dispersed storage buildings, truck parks, and repair facilities. The 1,900 miles of roads within the Panhandle are not the Lincoln highways of the 1920s, nor are they in the same class as a Burma Road or Alcan Highway. They are more similar to the logging roads of the west or Canada, but even these roads are designed to carry much heavier vehicles than those used in the Panhandle of Laos.

The road system of the Ho Chi Minh Trail extends in a north-south direction for over 300 miles across a rugged mountain chain 2,500 to 3,500 feet in elevation, from Mu Gia Pass in the north to the tri-border area (where Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam join) in the south. In terms of terrain and distances closer to home, moving supplies through the Ho Chi Minh Trail would be roughly analogous to traveling from Allentown to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Weather is a major factor in understanding the operation of the enemy's logistical system in Laos. In the Panhandle the dry season arrives in mid- to late October and lasts until about mid-May. During this period the Communists must move the bulk of their supplies to Cambodia and South

Note: This memorandum was prepared by the Office of Economic Research.

Vietnam because once the rains start it becomes extremely difficult to move large volumes of supplies over water soaked roads and to ford swollen streams. Finally, in moving supplies through the Ho Chi Minh Trail the Communists not only must overcome the problems of terrain, distance, and weather but must also cope with an unprecedented scale of US bombing.

The Communists rely heavily upon Soviet built trucks to move supplies. They also rely on a wide variety of other transport means as well. These include pipelines in the northern reaches of the Panhandle, and, when needed, oxcarts, bicycles, pirogues, and porters. Innovations such as free floating POL and food down the rivers are used with skill and effectiveness.

Description of the System *

Entry Corridors

1. Supplies enter the Laotian Panhandle through three major corridors: (1) the well-known Mu Gia Pass which is the northernmost entry route, (2) the Ban Karai Pass which was first opened in April 1966, and (3) Ban Raving Pass, more commonly known as the Western DMZ entry corridor, which was opened to traffic in December 1969. A look at a map makes it clear why the North Vietnamese have added the new entry corridors. From Mu Gia Pass to Tchepone is 90 miles. From the western DMZ to Tchepone is only 30 miles. Thus, by using the southern entry routes traffic moving into the Tchepone area avoids much of the harassment of the bombing. The availability of three major entry corridors also makes it easier for the North Vietnamese to counter the bombing.

2. In the northern reaches of the Panhandle, from the three passes south to the Tchepone area, there are a vast number of alternate roads that the North Vietnamese have built to counteract the effects of the bombing. Thus when one road is

* See the system map following page 10. A detailed map of the Tchepone area follows page 8.

interdicted there may be as many as four alternative routes over which the North Vietnamese can shunt traffic. In the Ban Karai Pass area there are as many as 5 roads that can be used to move supplies across the border into the system. The number of roads, alternatives, and bypasses in the area north of Tchepone has grown to such an extent that the road system there can be characterized as a web of interconnecting veins rather than a few mainline arteries.

3. South of Tchepone the road system is less dense because once supplies reach the Tchepone area they have passed the main brunt of the bombing. Nevertheless, the road system south of Tchepone is still highly redundant. There has been no letup in roadbuilding in the Panhandle: in 1965 there were 340 miles of road in the Panhandle, in 1968 there were 1,200 miles, today there are over 1,900 miles.

4. As one moves south through the road system there are key lateral roads running from west to east. These are the roads used to move supplies into South Vietnam. The first such lateral road is Route 9 which was an important enemy supply artery during the siege of Khe Sanh but was never used much by the Communists after that. Farther south Routes 926 and 922 lead to the A Shau Valley. Another 90 miles to the south a fan-shaped net of roads leads eastward from Chavane toward the central areas of Military Region 1 of South Vietnam. At the foot of the north/south system through the Laotian Panhandle is Route 110 which is used to move supplies either eastward into South Vietnam toward the vicinity of Dak To or Kontum or westward to the Cambodian supply route running south toward Siem Pang and Stung Treng.

Logistical Forces

5. The 40,000 to 50,000 personnel charged with moving supplies through the Panhandle of Laos are organized into about 16 logistical commands spread throughout the Panhandle. These commands -- called Binh Trams, meaning "military stations" in Vietnamese -- are of regimental size and will have between 1,500 and 3,000 men subordinate to each. Each Binh Tram has a number of engineer, transport, and AAA battalions.

6. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] On maps produced by the intelligence community the designated locations of Binh Trams tend to give the false impression that they operate at very specific locations. In fact, Binh Trams have large areas of responsibility that include many roads, numerous storage facilities, and other support facilities. Because of the threat of air strikes, storage sites and truck parks are carefully camouflaged, well dispersed, and only a part of them are in use at any one time. Each Binh Tram has subordinate units that man the defense and logistical facilities along the routes in its areas of responsibility. Rear Services Units command complexes of small dispersed storage buildings which may contain as many as 900 tons of supplies. Individual platoons may be in charge of a personnel way station (called a T-station). Even smaller groups will be dispersed along the roads to control traffic and relay forewarning of US air attacks that may be occurring further down the road.

7. We have learned [REDACTED] much about what can be called the "crude sophistication" of the enemy's logistical system. Truck repair, to cite one example, is performed at three separate echelons. A carburetor adjustment or other minor repair is supposed to be done by a repair crew of a few mechanics attached to a transportation platoon. More complicated repairs are done by larger repair shops attached to the transportation companies or at the battalion level.

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8. The Communists have assigned about 2,500 trucks to the Panhandle. The number of trucks attached to a single transportation battalion generally varies from 60 to 70. Defense and engineer battalions also maintain vehicles for their own use so that there will be between 60 and 300 trucks assigned to any one Binh Tram, the number generally declining further south along the main route structure. On any one night, however, usually not more than 50% of the trucks available in the Panhandle are on the road.

How the System Operates

9. The enemy's logistical system operates by moving supplies southward from one Binh Tram to another until the supplies are shunted eastward along one of the lateral routes leading to South Vietnam or until they reach the bottom of the funnel in the southern Panhandle and are moved into Cambodia (or South Vietnam).

10. This mode of operation calls for a great deal of shuttling by the trucks. A typical operation would be as follows: Trucks move out of a truck park [redacted] northwest of Tchepone, load supplies from a dispersed warehouse, and set out for a warehouse in [redacted] just south of Tchepone. Depending upon the threat of air attack (and more recently ground attack) a convoy of from 5 to 15 trucks, dispersed at 30-50 yard intervals, will move down the road. Speeds are slow, usually averaging about 10-15 miles per hour. Canopied parking areas are located at frequent spots along the road to avoid as much as possible having the trucks caught in an exposed position during an air attack. The trucks usually start their journey at nightfall so as to get to their assigned destination and be unloaded before daybreak. The empty trucks usually make the return trip the next night although, under "crash" programs such as we are observing now, they may make their deliveries and return the same night. Although it is unusual, trucks move in broad daylight on some

occasions, especially when there are emergency conditions or crash programs under way or inclement weather seriously inhibits US air operations.

11. Over the years, we have come to recognize a distinct three-phase cycle to movement of supplies through the Panhandle. The first phase begins in late September or October and is designed to get the roads, bridges, fords, and warehouses back in operating status. Bulldozers come out of caves where they have been in storage sites during the rainy season, and together with the engineering troops armed with axc and shovel, the road system is put back in operating condition in about a month.

12. In the second phase we begin to see the input of supplies into the system. These first inputs are used to replenish the stockpiles drawn down during the rainy season and to meet the projected needs of those who are operating the system as well as the thousands of infiltrators that pass through the system each year. The Communists methodically seem to concentrate on the restocking of the system before facing up to the problem of maintaining a throughput of supplies to replenish their stockpiles of combat material in South Vietnam or Cambodia. This dry season and last the Communists devoted most of the month of December to this restocking phase.

13. In the third phase the system goes into high gear, or what the Communists call their "general offensive," when they push supplies through to South Vietnam and Cambodia. This year the general offensive began on the night of 4 January, about the same date as last year.

The Surge Effect

14. Both last year and this year, activity in the Panhandle clearly reflects what we have come to call "the surge effect" as supplies flow southward through the system.

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15. As a specific Binh Tram reports on the accomplishments of its own crash program, Binh Trams further to the south then become more active. As the southward flow of supplies into the area under its control increases, the receiving Binh Tram then launches its own crash program to move the goods even further south. This pattern was very clear last month when the Communists launched a "crash" program [redacted]

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16. This surge of supplies from north to south through the Panhandle is similar to what we observed last year. The southward surge was reflected in [redacted]

[redacted] all of which began to report greater throughput tonnages exiting to South Vietnam as the transport offensive went on.

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17. The surge of supplies that we observe is not a one-time, massive slug of supplies finding its way for 300 miles south through the system. Last year, for example, the surge reached [redacted] the area around Ban Bac in the southern Panhandle, about mid-March. At about the same time the input of supplies through Mu Gia Pass, the most northern entry corridor, began to taper off, but the inputs through Ban Karai and the western DMZ routes were continuing at high levels. By late March the input through Ban Karai had pretty much phased out. But it was not until well

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into April that the inputs through the western DMZ route began to phase down. Thus for several months -- March and April in particular -- there were large flows of supplies moving throughout the entire system.

18. Last year's pattern is being repeated this dry season, and we clearly see an increasing level of traffic moving farther and farther south in the Panhandle. The new wrinkle this year is that the Communists, clearly anticipating the Allied incursions toward Tchepone, have accelerated their supply movements in a series of crash programs.

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19. This system of a series of crash programs to accelerate an increased level of supply movements has a two-fold objective. First, to supply the Communist combat forces opposing Lam Son 719, and, second, to move at record rates the normal throughput of supplies out of the potentially dangerous Tchepone area to the Binh Trams to the south.

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Measuring the Flow

21. The most difficult problem in understanding the operation of the Ho Chi Minh Trail is to gain an appreciation of the volume of supplies that move through the system. Ideally, one would want to know the volume that entered the system, the volume consumed within Laos, and the tonnages that moved into Cambodia and South Vietnam. Obviously, the composition of these supplies whether rice, ammunition, weapons, or salt is even more important.

22. Years ago when Mu Gia Pass was the major entry point the task was easier.

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26. In view of the vast amount of labor that has gone into the building of the Ho Chi Minh Trail the total tonnages of supplies moved from one Binh Tram to another frequently sound small to those unfamiliar with the logistic statistics on the war in Indochina. Indeed, they seem small compared to the 40,000 to 50,000 men employed in moving them. They are microscopic when compared to other benchmarks -- US requirements in South Vietnam, or even Communist military requirements in the Korean War.

27. However, they can be put in perspective in terms of the war in South Vietnam by realizing that the very large tonnages of ordnance that arrived in Sihanoukville -- a route not subject to interdiction or natural obstacles -- for the VC/NVA forces -- 21,600 tons -- averaged out to about 20 tons a day between the time these deliveries started and the time they ended. Thus the ammunition and weapons that nightly move down the Ho Chi Minh Trail seem adequate for maintaining a hot war in Indochina.